

MIDDLE GRADES SPOTLIGHT

A Newsletter for California's Middle Grades Educator

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Welcome...

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Welcome to the first, Fall 2002 edition of the ***Middle Grades Spotlight***, a quarterly publication produced by the Middle Grades Office of the California Department of Education. The primary intent of the ***Middle Grades Spotlight*** is to illuminate the recommendations in ***Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Student***, to highlight issues, research, and resources pertinent to middle grades, to focus on best practices and strategies of middle schools, and to showcase schools that are working toward a center stage position as a high performer.



Seven Key Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents:

- Positive social interaction with adults and peers
- Structure and clear limits
- Physical activity
- Creative expression
- Self-competence and achievement
- Meaningful participation in families and school communities
- Opportunities for self-definition.

As a middle school educator, we hope this becomes your publication and that you will take the opportunity to share how your school is progressing and implementing one or more of the recommendations with positive and consistent results. We would like to spotlight this aspect of your school in a subsequent publication.

We will certainly share successes of all-around high-performing schools, but we are also interested in sharing spotlight success stories of schools that are in progress and that are overcoming barriers and challenges such as high poverty, high English learner populations, high enrollment numbers, and wide gaps in academic achievement between significant subgroups. What systems, strategies, practices, and interventions are working? How are results of student achievement linked and measured? What we spotlight can serve as inspiration and guidance to other schools with similar challenges, but we must hear from you. Please contact us. (See page 4.)

This edition of ***Middle Grades Spotlight*** will focus on the second part of Recommendation 1 in ***Taking Center Stage***: "Implement rigorous and consistent standards while maintaining a dynamic student-centered culture." What exactly is a dynamic, student-centered culture, and why is it so important in creating a high-achieving, learning environment?

We hope you enjoy this first issue and understand that the ***Middle Grades Spotlight*** will evolve and grow richer with your input. Thank you.

Razlyn Warrall, Administrator

High Expectations + Dynamic Student-Centered Culture = Student Achievement



Taking Center Stage (TCS) Recommendation #1: *Implement rigorous and consistent standards while maintaining a dynamic student-centered culture.*

Dynamic Student-Centered Culture refers to the contextual elements of place (climate) and the relationships in a community of learners, which includes norms, beliefs, practices, and routines. Schools can become invitational—fundamentally attractive as a place to teach and learn. The culture is responsive and centered on the developmental needs (social, emotional, intellectual, and physical) of the adolescent.

When California adopted rigorous core content standards for all students, it was never with the intent that these high expectations would be implemented in a vacuum. Student achievement is the result of high expectations built on the foundation of a dynamic student-centered culture. Not surprisingly, high-performing middle schools generally have a positive school culture based on the needs of their student population.

In contrast, many low-performing middle schools may lack positive school cultures. Results of academic audits conducted in some of California's lowest-performing middle schools during the 2001-02 school year showed that these schools lacked high expectations for teaching and learning and had counter productive environments that inhibited learning.

New tool for self-assessing school climate available on the Middle Grades Office Web site. This rubric can be used by a principal or by a "walk through" team to quickly gauge whether a school is at the beginning stages of implementation or is at a more fully implemented level. One valuable way that this tool may be used is for teachers to do a "walk through" of other classrooms on their own campus and then to discuss what full implementation would be like and what resources/conditions would be necessary for full implementation.

The schools were crowded and in disrepair. The learning communities were large and impersonal. Systems for discipline and motivation for student achievement and behavior were incoherent and fragmented. Students did not feel safe, valued, or confident about their future. Communication among teachers, administrators, parents, and students was often non-existent.

To help turn these schools around, the corrective actions addressed not only standards-based curricular issues, but also school community, culture, and communications. All of these components are integrally linked to student achievement.

Young adolescents are undeniably a challenging population to teach under the best of circumstances. Hormonal changes, peer groups, an expanding sense of self, and need for independence drive their behaviors. Adolescents, although they may deny it, need structure, clear expectations, and a sense of community and connectedness that is centered on their specific needs. (*See the Seven Key Developmental Needs of Young Adolescents on page 1.*)

Three years ago researchers at the Education Development Center¹ found in a national study of high-performing, high-poverty middle schools that students at these schools expressed a strong sense of belonging and a belief that teachers and their peers really cared about learning.

Poverty of students and/or speaking a primary language other than English are not reasons to ignore or disregard the effects of school culture on learning. It is a reason to pay particular attention to creating a personalized and supportive learning environment that embraces the special needs of those students and their families.

In a seminal, longitudinal research study (97 high-poverty middle schools—15,000 students and 900 teachers) conducted by Robert Felner² and his colleagues at the University of Illinois, 1997, it was reported that the higher the level of implementation of a student-centered approach to learning, the higher the level of student achievement.

Quantitatively, the research reported an achievement increase of nearly +.75 standard-deviation units at schools characterized as positive and supportive of students.

What Does a Positive School Culture Look Like?

- Personality of Place → School structure is inviting and engages students in learning.
- Positive Policies and Rules → Rules are administered consistently, developmentally appropriate, and supportive of a learning organization.
- Professional Roles → Roles of students and adults are clearly defined and learning-oriented.
- Perceptions → Staff and students possess a positive, student-centered “We can do it!” attitude.
- Caring → Teachers and administrators care about students and their success.
- Collaboration and Cooperation → Everyone collaborates and cooperation is an expected norm.
- Commitment, Motivation, Effort and Investment → Everyone does everything possible to ensure that everyone succeeds; all students will succeed at the highest levels.

The following is an excerpt from TCS Chapter 6, page 122.

“Successful standards-based middle schools are characterized by high-quality work enhanced and enabled by excellent teaching and a supportive school culture.”

Learning occurs in:

- A context that values fairness, equity, justice, honor, civility, service to others, and democratic principles
- A classroom that emphasizes the ability of all students to do quality work and to meet the standards
- An attractive setting that says “Education is valued here!”

- A place that honors the richness of human diversity
- Inclusive groups that have caring, competent teachers, and differentiated instruction
- A school that values participation, cooperation, and collaboration among teachers, administrators, students, and parents

Active learning:

- Develops student proficiency through creative work
- Focuses on the most important knowledge and skills
- Emphasizes the value of redoing, polishing, and perfecting
- Takes place where a variety of assessment options are used to guide teaching and student progress
- Emphasizes direct and frequent interaction with real-life experiences
- Involves knowing where to find information and encourages problem solving and active engagement

IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Lemon Grove Middle School (LGMS) - Lemon Grove, CA
2002 Achieving School

LGMS has been on the same campus for over 70 years, but visitors see strong evidence of “pride in our learning place.” With an average of 16 computers in every classroom and its own

TV station, LGMS offers a very technologically enriched environment.

LGMS believes in fostering maturity by enabling students to make responsible decisions. Student connection is the key. Nearly every student participates in the wide array of before and after school clubs offered in conjunction with the adjacent community center. When students need additional help, they can always get it — homework and tutoring supports are available everyday to all students. Their *LemonLink* Project lends computers to students and their parents to provide homework assistance through online supports.

Results? Strong API growth over time!

SCHOOL PROFILE:

SAN DIEGO COUNTY
851 students (20% mobility)
API – 698 (up +92 points since 1999)
15% English Learners
59% reduced/free meals
~highly diverse student population

¹ C.C. Morocco and others, “Cultures of Excellence and Belonging in Urban Middle Schools,” *Research in Middle Level Education*, 2002, Vol. 25, 2.

² Robert D. Felner and others, “The Impact of School Reform for the Middle Years,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 78 (March 1997), pp. 528-550.

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Resources & News

October is the Month of the Young Adolescent, an annual national collaborative effort of education, health, and youth-oriented organizations focusing on the needs of the young adolescent, ages 10–14. Mindful that the issues and concerns affecting this important age group deserve year-round attention and commitment, the Month of the Young Adolescent draws attention to the unique needs of young adolescents and the ways people can support these children.



Check out the National Middle Schools Association (NMSA) Web site for more information:
<<http://www.nmsa.org/>>.



Middle Grades Handbook

Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students was written primarily for teachers and principals. This handbook emphasizes the importance of a student-centered middle grades philosophy as a strong and compatible foundation for standards-based education in California.

Visit the California Department of Education (CDE) Press Web site for ordering information:
<<http://www.cde.ca.gov/cdepress/>>



No Child Left Behind: Check out the new federal legislation requirements: <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/pr/nclb/>>

California Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage (STW-TCS) Project



Is your school a model for others?

California is seeking a few high-performing middle schools to serve as models that meet the following criteria:

- Academic Excellence
- Developmental Responsiveness
- Social Equity
- Organized to Support High Performance

Visit the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) Web site for application information: <<http://www.cholla.net/clms/stw/index.htm>>

Deadline for applications: November 1, 2002 -- 5 p.m.



Looking Ahead...

Year 2002

Oct. 10-11 CA Middle Grades Partnership Network Coordinators Mtg.—Pasadena

Oct. 31-Nov. 2 NMSA 29th Annual Conference & Exhibit—Portland, Oregon

Nov. 1 STW-TCS High Performing Middle Schools Applications — Deadline

Nov. 5 School Renovation Technology Grants, Grades 4-8*— Deadline

Dec. 12-13 CA Middle Grades Partnership Network Coordinators Mtg.-Orange Co.

Dec. 20 Refugee Students Assistance Program Grants*— Deadline

*CDE Funding Opportunities: <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/funding/>>
See CDE Calendar of Events: <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/calendar/>>

